

Empathy and leadership style: a close connection

OCTOBER 8, 2020 | ARTICLES



According to the 2020 State of Workplace Empathy research, 91% of CEOs say their own company is empathetic, but only 68% of employees agree. Such a gap may be a problem. But how to fix it? Let's start with teaching leaders empathy. Here are some ground rules.

The State of Workplace Empathy shows that "empathy continues to play a key role for employees considering where they would take employment, their salary, their work effort, and whether they will stay at their current organisation." For example, 74% of responders participating in the study admit that they would work longer hours for an empathetic employer and 76% of workers believe an empathetic organisation inspires more motivated

employees.

Nevertheless, not all leaders are aware of that, which may expose hiring processes in the company. During the coronavirus pandemic, empathy has become more valuable than ever. Yet, according to the study, employees' and HR professionals' ratings of their own company's empathetic behaviours have fallen steadily since 2018. This trend needs to stop.

How to exercise empathy?

Can empathy be taught? Scientists agree that some people are genetically inclined to be highly empathic. Nevertheless, a meta-analysis of the efficacy of empathy training published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* suggests that empathy training programmes are effective. Experts admit that almost everyone (child or adult) can develop empathy. Practice is key.

Professional empathy courses are available worldwide, but as John Malouff, Associate Professor at the School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences at the University of New England, wrote: "Adults can increase their empathy outside formal training. They can start by looking for signs others are experiencing an emotion".

From a CEOs perspective, it is essential to distinguish different types of empathy. Understanding them can help them build stronger, more effective relationships at work. Generally, empathy is the ability to understand and share the thoughts or feelings of another, but not always in the same way.

Psychologists Daniel Goleman and Paul Ekman break down the concept of empathy into three categories:

Emotional empathy is when you feel physically along with the other person, as though their emotions were contagious. It helps to build emotional connections with others.

Compassionate empathy. With this kind of empathy, we not only understand a person's predicament and feel with them, but are spontaneously moved to help, if needed.

Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand how a person feels and what they might be thinking. Cognitive empathy makes us better communicators because it helps us relay information in a way that best reaches the other person. And this is actually that type of empathy that should be practiced by CEOs.

As a leader you do not need to "feel the pain" of your employees, but you must imagine and understand how the employee may feel in a given situation and react in accordance with these feelings.

Leaders empathy tool guide

But how exactly should one exercise empathy? IMSA Search members present a short guide for all leaders who prefer to train on their own.

Practice awareness: Very often, when we talk about empathy, we focus on the ability to read people's facial expressions and posture. Of course, this skill is essential, but probably it is not the best place to start your empathy training. To be an empathic leader, you need to be self-aware. As a start, check your privilege. Think about things that gave you your status, all the help you have got on the way to the top. It may be a simple thing like the fact that you didn't have to work during your studies. Or maybe you can afford a nanny and don't have to worry about your children while working overtime. You will probably notice how many helpful factors apply to your current situation if you think about it.

When you're done, try to find your bias. Everyone has at least one and realising it is essential to fight your prejudice. If you need more information about how to combat your bias, check the IMSA Search guide for CHROs. It can be helpful, not only for hiring (link1).

Link1: <https://www.imsa-search.com/articles/combating-bias-how-to-make-sure-your-recruitment-process-is-objective/>

Don't assume: We tend to consider the most obvious explanation to the problem and adjust facts and data to match our prejudice. When CEOs hear that one of the managers is late at work every day, they probably assume they are lazy. Empathetic leaders cannot stop at the common explanation but should challenge their assumptions to find the truth. A good solution is to follow one of the oldest anthropological rules: all people's actions are reasonable in their reality. And if it seems different, we probably don't understand their perspective. Why would a reasonable person jeopardise a career? Maybe they are using public transport, and the timetable doesn't allow them to be at work earlier? There may be various reasons, and considering them before forming an explanation is a valid empathy exercise.

Be curious and talk to people: Practicing empathy in the office's privacy is not an option. Try to talk to people you usually don't speak to. Start with a simple lift conversation but try to go beyond business small-talk. Be curious about other people's life and opinion. Ask questions and allow them to speak. Remember that your priority is to hear them, not share your point of view or give them unwanted advice.

Pay attention to details: When talking to another person, try not only to listen but also to see your interlocutor. Notice their posture, gesture, and tone of voice. Most of us don't need a playbook with a list of facial expressions to understand other people's emotions. Relax and just go with the conversation flow. Try to treat your interlocutor how you would wish to be treated in their place. Don't think about this as a task but as a process. By exercising your ability to listen you become more and more empathetic.

Be patient: Be forgiving to yourself and accept that some parts of this conversation may be a little awkward. But without trying, you won't achieve anything.

